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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

Office of Legislative Counsel

Washington, D. C. 20505

Telephone: 351-6121 (Code 143-6121)
10 October 1978

OLC 78-3206

HSC/

TO: Ms. Diane E. LaVoy
Permanent Select Committee on
Intelligence

Dear Diane:

Based on Chairman Rose's expressed interest in cognitive bias, I am forwarding two CIA publications on the subject: (a) A Confidential NFAC publication entitled "Analytical Methods Review," dated October 1978, and (b) An unclassified study entitled "Cognitive Biases in the Evaluation of Intelligence Estimates."

I hope that you will find them of interest.

Sincerely,

Assistant Legislative Counsel

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Enclosures

FORM 6-68 1533 OBSOLETE 6-68 PREVIOUS EDITIONS CONFIDENTIAL AUTOMATICALLY DECLASSIFIED IN 10 YEARS (40)
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Analytical Methods Review

October 1978

Confidential

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October 1978

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COGNITIVE BIASES IN THE EVALUATION OF INTELLIGENCE ESTIMATES

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Methods & Forecasting Division
Office of Regional and Political Analysis

Evaluations of intelligence analysis -- both our own evaluations of our judgments and estimates and evaluations of our work by others -- are distorted by systematic biases. These biases are not simply the product of self-interest and lack of objectivity; they stem from the nature of human mental processes and are difficult and perhaps impossible to overcome. The result is that we overestimate the quality of our own performance as intelligence analysts, and that others underestimate the quality and usefulness of our efforts. The reasons for these biases and psychological experiments that demonstrate their existence and persistence are described below.

Psychologists observe that limitations in man's mental machinery (memory, attention span, reasoning capability, etc.) affect his ability to process information to arrive at judgmental decisions. In order to cope with the complexity of our environment, these limitations force us to employ various simplifying strategies for perception, comprehension, inference, and decision. Many psychological experiments demonstrate that our mental processes often lead to erroneous judgments. When such mental errors are not random errors, but are consistently and predictably in the same direction, they are known as cognitive biases.

This paper discusses three cognitive biases relating to how we evaluate ourselves and how others evaluate us as